

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Julia Grant
*The Boy Problem: Educating Boys in
Urban America, 1870–1970*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 230 pp.

Molly Ladd-Taylor

York University

This short book provides a much-needed historical perspective on a question that has generated a lot of debate: why do boys so often perform poorly academically and act disruptively at school? Julia Grant's broad overview of education and anti-delinquency programs in northern U.S. cities demonstrates that the "boy problem" is not a recent phenomenon or one that can be attributed to feminism. Rather, educators have been preoccupied with the lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and disruptive behaviour of boys since the first days of compulsory school attendance.

Historians of urban education and American childhood will find few surprises in these pages, but *The Boy Problem* is a useful survey that historicizes the current crisis in boys' education. Grant begins her study in the mid-nineteenth century, when school attendance became compulsory and reformers attempted to contain and control the so-called dangerous classes (as urban working-class and immigrant youth were known) within child-saving institutions. She shows that institutions ostensibly developed for all children were actually focused on boys.

The heart of the book explores how popular and scientific ideas about boy nature, and especially psychologist G. Stanley Hall's theory of boys' inherent savagery, shaped anti-delinquency work and boys' education. One chapter examines reformers' attempts to redirect what they saw as boys' aggressive energies toward "wholesome" recreation, but more space is devoted to compulsory schooling and special education. Grant argues convincingly that school failure and the new crime of truancy were problems actually created by compulsory education and points out that the notion that boys had a natural instinct for naughtiness made it difficult to distinguish the simply mischievous boy from the one who was violent and intractable. Challenging the assumption that youth mainly left school because of work

responsibilities, she emphasizes the lure of freedom outside school. Grant also pays considerable attention to the development of special education, a term she uses to encompass reform schools for troublemakers as well as institutions and special classes for those considered slow learners. She argues that special education programs were often a dumping ground for "bad" boys who disrupted the regular classroom. While IQ tests, awash with racial and ethnic prejudices, sorted urban schoolchildren into separate tracks, the language of disability transformed behaviour once considered a moral problem into a medical one.

The last two chapters examine the masculine "peer cultures of delinquency" (11) that contributed to boys' troubles in school. A major focus is the Chicago Area Project, a community-based delinquency-prevention initiative established by sociologist Clifford Shaw. Shaw and his colleagues stressed the environmental causes of delinquency, and Grant notes that their efforts to gain the trust of gang members and their failure to question the code of masculinity operating in delinquent peer groups may have worsened racial and ethnic conflicts and boys' sexist behaviors. The limitations of their approach exacerbated the plight of African American boys, who migrated north after the Second World War and were soon overrepresented in the special education and juvenile justice systems. Social workers and sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier critiqued racism, discrimination, and poverty, but like their predecessors who worked with white ethnic gang members they failed to challenge masculine peer cultures in which violence and law-breaking were the norm. An epilogue takes the story from the 1960s to the zero tolerance culture of the present day.

Like most small books on large topics, *The Boy Problem* raises more questions than it answers. Grant's story is largely told from the perspective of the experts and reformers, and she is at her best when exploring how gendered ideas about the supposed nature of boys shaped educational policy and anti-delinquency programs in the interwar period. By comparison, she has little to say about boys' own perspective on their education or about other factors that might have affected their experience of school: school funding, bureaucratization, racial politics, differential opportunities for success, curriculum, and so on. Grant's unfortunate decision to exclude southern and western cities and to limit her discussion of race to African Americans in the Midwest makes it difficult to evaluate her claim that the story she tells has national implications. (The exclusion of Latinos is especially disappointing, given the flourishing scholarship on Mexican Chicago, the main city in her analysis). The civil rights movement and education reforms of the Great Society could have used an entire chapter.

Despite these limitations, *The Boy Problem* is a valuable historical study of a pressing social problem that will find wide readership in social work, childhood studies, and education. Readers may disagree with the specifics of Grant's analysis, but few will dispute her main conclusion: boys, girls, and the entire society would be better off if boys' human qualities, rather than their imagined boyishness, were nurtured and encouraged.